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RUSSIA: Old Believers use new media to demand religious freedom

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Old Believers are among the many religious communities which have been unable to get back places of worship confiscated during the Soviet period, despite a 2003 presidential decree ordering their return. As Forum 18 News Service has found, Old Believer communities of the Moscow-based Belokrinitsa concord are increasingly turning to the internet to raise these and other religious freedom concerns. They told Forum 18 that internet coverage and associated lobbying saved one of their parishes in Yaroslavl Region from being stripped of legal status in 2007. Yet in Tolyatti in Samara Region the parish does not yet know if publicity will prevent their half-built church's building permission from being removed. "If the church is declared illegal, they'll have to knock it down," Old Believer website editor Irina Budkina told Forum 18. "That would be an act of sacrilege." In Morshansk in Tambov Region, a parish briefly recovered a historical church in 2002, only to see it re-confiscated. Asked by Forum 18 why the building could not function as a church again, the head of the town's Cultural Department insisted that it was impossible for residents to live so close to "such an institution".

Old Believer communities in parts of European Russia are discovering that internet publicity and associated lobbying can prove key to defending their freedom of worship, Forum 18 News Service has found. One priest denied access to bring communion to a parishioner in a local prison was allowed in after his complaint was aired on a website in August 2007. Old Believers told Forum 18 that internet coverage saved one of their parishes in Yaroslavl Region from being stripped of legal status. Whether such coverage will help Old Believers in Morshansk in Tambov Region to recover the historical Dormition Church - confiscated again after its brief return in 2002 - remains unclear. The town mayor has prevented the community from holding prayer services outside the church.

All the communities concerned belong to the Moscow-based Belokrinitsa concord (soglasiye), the largest Old Believer branch in Russia. Formed in the mid-nineteenth century, it has a church hierarchy, unlike some other Old Believer branches.

In Tolyatti (Samara Region), the 70-strong Belokrinitsa parish is waiting to see whether permission for its partly built St George's Church will be rescinded. "If the church is declared illegal, they'll have to knock it down," Irina Budkina, editor of <<http://www.samstar.ru>> Old Believer website, which has highlighted the case over the past six months, told Forum 18 on 14 January. "That would be an act of sacrilege, as when the militant atheists tore down crosses and destroyed churches in the 1920s and 30s." On 10 January the Volga Region's Federal Arbitration Court granted the Old Believers' appeal against the annulment of the state's original decision to allot them land for the church. The case is due to be reheard at Samara Regional Arbitration Court within the next few months, said Budkina, "but it's unclear what will happen."

Allotted the land by the then mayor of Tolyatti, Nikolai Utkin, in May 2006, the Old Believers held a ceremony to erect a consecration cross at the site the same month. The lower storey of the traditional sixteenth-century style church is now under construction, according to Budkina.

No one legally challenged the Old Believers' rights to the land for six months before and a year after it was allotted, <<http://www.samstar.ru>> reported. But then the administration of Stavropol District, which includes Tolyatti, did so in May 2007. The Old Believers suspect this was due to the adjacent construction of Tolyatti's largest shopping mall, a development which has turned their church site into prime real estate. They also note that the city district's challenge was facilitated by the detention of Mayor Utkin on suspicion of bribe-taking. Elsewhere in Samara region, points out <<http://www.samstar.ru>>, numerous acts privatising land and property have been annulled whenever a change of mayor has taken place.

"This is an extremely unusual case," the head of Stavropol District's Property Committee, Eduard Zhin, told Forum 18 on 18 January. When the plot was given to the Old Believers in 2006, he said, "it wasn't entered on the cadastral register in the way we now understand it, and this wasn't taken into account at the time." He acknowledged that the state authorities may have been slow in responding to the oversight.

Territory belonging to a state hospital, the plot of land where the Old Believers are building has not been transferred to anyone else,

insisted Zhin. "We plan to use it to develop the district," he maintained. Provided funds are forthcoming, an ambulance station will be built at the site, he told Forum 18.

With the issue still to be decided in court, Zhin said that it is not yet clear whether the Old Believers will have to vacate the land. He was also unsure whether they will receive an alternative plot if they do. "The situation is complicated," he remarked to Forum 18, "and I simply don't understand why it has arisen here and now."

As commercial pressures begin to dominate in newly-wealthy parts of Russia, religious communities' property rights may be challenged. In Kaluga, a Pentecostal church is threatened with the loss of a building it bought in 2002 as it now stands in the centre of a shopping mall construction site (see F18News 30 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1040>). Even the Russian Orthodox Church is not exempt, as illustrated by the recent loss of a historical hospital church in Khabarovsk (see F18News 23 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1038>).

Despite a 23 April 2003 presidential decree ordering the return of federally owned buildings of religious significance to religious communities, progress has been slight. As in the case of the Catholic parish of Christ the King in Barnaul (Altai Region), protracted campaigns involving thick files of apparently futile correspondence with state bodies are common (see F18News 3 August 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=624>). The same applies when religious communities - such as Moscow's Molokans - attempt to acquire land to build new houses of worship (see F18News 29 November 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1054>).

After 60 years of petitioning, Samara's Belokrinitsa Old Believer parish received its historical church building back from the state in September 2006 (see F18News 8 February 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=908>). Irina Budkina suggested on 14 January that this was thanks to coverage of the case by Forum 18 (see F18News 30 March 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=533>).

In Morshansk in Tambov Region, Old Believers continue to fight for the return of their historical Dormition Church. Transferred to the community by the town authorities in October 2002, it was withdrawn again just two weeks later at the request of residents of an adjacent building, the former priest's house. "The location of a religious association of a different faith from ours in our yard disturbs the future of our children," <<http://www.samstar.ru>> reported the residents as complaining, "most of all their security, health and moral development". Gas and electricity supplies were cut on the building's 2002 transfer back to the state and it is now deteriorating.

The elder of the Morshansk Old Believer community confirmed that the state authorities refused to return the Dormition Church to his community. Declining to give his full name, Andrei told Forum 18 on 21 January that the most recent legal objection given is that the church - built by the widow of a pre-1917 mayor of Morshansk who was an Old Believer - stands next to residential accommodation, "but this regulation refers to construction." Registered in Morshansk District, the 10-20 members of his community meet at home for worship, he said. "Without a church it's not the same - we have to shorten services." Andrei also suggested that more people would attend services in a church building.

Four times during autumn 2007 Morshansk's mayor, Gennadi Kalinin, withheld permission for an Old Believer prayer service to be held outside the church followed by a separate demonstration for its return, the community elder confirmed to Forum 18. "We wanted to have it inside the church, but they wouldn't let us do it either inside or out."

Even though only several dozen participants were expected, the Morshansk authorities claimed that the prayer service and demonstration could not be held outside the church due to its proximity to a courthouse, college and residential accommodation, local activist Sergei Kiryushatov told Forum 18 on 14 January. Kiryushatov is the representative in the town of the Eurasian Youth Union, the youth wing of Aleksandr Dugin's radically anti-western International Eurasian Movement, which has collected 400 signatures in support of the church's return to the Old Believer community. He said officials also argued that the local Old Believers had nothing to do with the church because they are registered in Morshansk district rather than the city itself, he told Forum 18.

While none of the Morshansk Old Believers belong to the Eurasian Youth Union, it does have Old Believer members elsewhere in Russia, Kiryushatov continued. He said some of them had intended to take part in the demonstration. "We support the Old Believers because we support Russian traditions," he explained.

Svetlana Malysheva, who deals with the case as head of Morshansk Town Administration's Cultural Department, admitted to Forum 18 on 21 January that she lives in the former priests' house alongside the church and had supported the residents' petition against its return. Yet she failed to see any conflict of interest in this and her official position. "Of course it's in the interest of us residents to have a museum there," she explained. "But it's in the interests of the whole town - the state has spent a huge amount of money restoring it."

The local Old Believer community - which Malysheva claimed numbers fewer than half a dozen people - are demanding that the "very valuable monument of federal architecture" be transferred to them only now that it has been restored, she maintained: "When it was in a bad state, they didn't want it." Malysheva also suggested that the church had been "disfigured" because the Old Believers

had made it the subject of a dispute and so caused its heating supply to be turned off.

Asked why the building could not function as a church again, the head of Morshansk Cultural Department insisted that it was impossible for residents to live so close to "such an institution": "There will be church processions, funerals, rituals and bells right in front of people's windows." As well as being the only place where residents' small children can play, the shared yard is too small for the installation of a toilet, according to Malysheva. This meant that visitors had started knocking on residents' doors and "doing who knows what" during the few weeks when the Old Believers had had use of the church, she told Forum 18.

While the Old Believer community in Rybinsk (Yaroslavl Region) has been given partial use of a church building, a local television channel refused to air its paid advertisement for a celebratory concert there in August 2007. When he approached Rybinsk-40 television channel, Denis Lupekin, the chief editor of "Staraya Rus" Old Believer website (<<http://cddk.ru>>), was told that written permission from the local Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) bishop was required before the advertisement could be run. "We didn't comply, of course, as we don't need such permission," he told Forum 18 on 14 January. Another private television station in Yaroslavl did later run the advertisement.

Lupekin speculated that local Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) clergy in Rybinsk - rather than Archbishop Kirill (Nakonechny) of Yaroslavl and Rostov - were behind the television channel's obstruction: "Maybe they're afraid because it is the first Old Believer church in town." While the church - of which the Old Believers have been given rented use of the second of three storeys inserted in the Soviet period - belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate before 1917, Archbishop Kirill was not opposed to its transfer to the Old Believers, he pointed out. In a very poor state, Lupekin added, the other two storeys of the church continue to house a number of Soviet-era trade union organisations.

An Old Believer chapel dating from 1905-1914 does survive in Rybinsk, Lupekin told Forum 18, but as it currently houses a children's music school "it would be neither easy nor ethical to push them out." The Old Believers have not tried to place another advertisement with Rybinsk-40 since last summer, he added, "in part because the need hasn't arisen, but also because we didn't want to raise passions while we still have only one storey out of three." The question of transferring the whole building to the Old Believers is only now beginning to be reviewed by the state authorities, he said.

"Russia is an Orthodox country so we asked for the blessing of the Russian Orthodox dean of Rybinsk," the head of the advertising department at Rybinsk-40 television channel, Marina Baskakova, admitted to Forum 18 on 18 January. "We have no doubts about whether we acted properly or not - this is a commercial channel and in principle I have the right to refuse advertisements according to my convictions." While Old Belief "is of course tied up with Christianity one way or another," she remarked, "very many sectarians" approach the channel.

Asked whom she regarded as sectarians, Baskakova mentioned the Jewish mystical tradition, Kabbalah. "We're not experts, especially in religious questions, so we thought it better to have the advertisement approved," she explained. "If someone who comes to me is from a sect it's clear, but if they represent some kind of church then I go to a knowledgeable person, in this case the dean." While the Russian Orthodox dean of Rybinsk did approve the Old Believers' advertisement, she said, she was unable to contact them again.

Also in Yaroslavl Region, publicity generated by <<http://cddk.ru>> website prevented the liquidation of an Old Believer parish in Yelokhino village, the chairman of the community, Kirill Vitushkin, believes. "Young people from that website helped us and they didn't close us down," he told Forum 18 on 14 January. In April 2007 Nekrasovskoye District Tax Inspectorate informed the Yelokhino parish that it was no longer a legal personality as it had not submitted tax documents correctly. On raising the issue with the regional tax inspectorate in Yaroslavl, however, the district branch was found to have made a mistake, said Vitushkin. "The effect of being closed down would have been negative, of course," he remarked. "If we hadn't raised the issue we could have lost the state aid we get for church restoration, or they could have fined us." The 100-year-old Dormition Church in Yelokhino is one of the few Old Believer churches not closed during the Soviet period, he told Forum 18.

Featured on local Saratov news website <<http://news.sarbc.ru>> in August 2007, Old Believer priest Fr Vadim Korovin complained that he had been refused permission to take communion and religious literature to a parishioner in a local prison. A week later, however, Fr Korovin withdrew the complaint, saying that he had been able to make an unrestricted visit to the parishioner since its publication. (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of <<http://www.samstar.ru>> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947>.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

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[f18news @ editor.forum18.org](mailto:f18news@editor.forum18.org)

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY